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TTRA 2017 Extended Abstract
Conservation Meets Concierge:
A National Park “Friends” Association as a Purveyor of Visitor Experience

Introduction

The US National Park Service (NPS) has just concluded a successful centennial year with record visitation that brought higher entrance and new corporate sponsorships. Nevertheless, demands are high to increase funding available for infrastructure improvements, maintenance, visitor programs, and management initiatives. “Friends of” nonprofit associations have had a history of offering invaluable assistance and helping to fill identified gaps. The associations can offer membership benefits and visitor opportunities different from what the park itself can offer its visitors and advocates. In this blended role, a “friends” association is uniquely positioned to provide programs and experiences to park visitors that reflect its knowledgeable and trusted insider position, while adhering to a mission of conservation, advocacy and public education. To be sustainable and successful, an association must determine what drives visitors and park enthusiasts to become members and supporters/participants of the group, and whether the role of activity provider is in fact worthwhile, even amidst competition from other private outfitters.

This research focuses specifically on a “friends” group of an iconic and highly visited national park in the western United States. This particular association was founded in the 1930s and is the official nonprofit partner of its associated national park. Membership has more than doubled in the past five years, currently reaching around 15,000 members. The organization’s field institute, which leads outdoor trips and educational programs for members and the public, has nearly doubled in participation in the last five years and currently provides programs to about 3,000 participants annually. Activities and classes include backpacking courses, photography workshops, family outings, history tours, and more. Utilizing the organization’s offerings can facilitate an easier trip planning process and reduce certain travel risks for families, groups, individuals, and international tourists. The studied “friends” association has played a significant role in financial assistance to the park, with over \$4 million raised and donated to the national park in 2015. The organization is pleased with their recent successes and strives to keep its upward momentum strong.

Broadly, the tourism industry has been promoting that all citizens, particularly workers, should take vacations. The NPS is also encouraging all US citizens to visit their parks to experience the historical efforts of resource protection, see different landscapes, and indulge in enjoyable outdoor recreation experiences. Researching consumers who have joined a national park’s “friends” association affords a unique opportunity to apply consumer psychology theory to test hedonic versus utilitarian product choices using Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). This research seeks to understand the relationships between personal factors, external environment, and behavior in members’ interests in the association’s diverse offerings. As a theoretical extension, this research investigates the extent to which members were drawn to joining the organization because of moral or belief-based factors, such as the public good and conservation, versus personal or hedonic factors, such the ability to have a unique, memorable, and unparalleled travel experience. While it would seem logical that people would seek hedonic products (i.e., activities and experiences) while on vacation, the assumption becomes less straightforward when considering that the provider is a cause-based nonprofit organization,

which are generally associated with more utilitarian or altruistic offerings. There has been limited research so far addressing this unique consumer situation.

Literature Review

Social cognitive theory: Social cognitive theory (SCT) provides a hypothetical foundation for understanding the motivations and behaviors of the association members. SCT depicts a triadic model consisting of behavior, cognitive and personal factors, and external environment, which have reciprocal influences on one another (Wood & Bandura, 1989). As defined by Bandura (1986), personal (and cognitive) factors include one's beliefs in their own abilities (self-efficacy), personal values, knowledge, and morals. External factors reflect modeling and learning behavior from others, as well as motivational incentives. Expected positive rewards from a certain behavior are thought to increase the likelihood of one performing that behavior (Bandura, 1986). While SCT has been applied to help understand nonprofit support and donation behavior in some previous studies (Cheung & Chan, 2000; Oosterhof, Heuvelman, & Peters, 2009), there has been limited application of the theory to understand one's choice to support a cause in which the individual may also potentially benefit in terms of personally accessing recreational and educational opportunities.

Applications in outdoor recreation and sustainable tourism: Research focused on tourists has similarly concurred that people are more likely to exhibit pro-environmental behavior when exposed to persuasive social norms (Goldstein, Cialdini, Griskevicius, 2008). In outdoor recreation literature, most research incorporating the themes of SCT has focused on the concept of self-efficacy (Ferguson & Jones, 2001; Jones & Hinton, 2007; Propst & Koesler, 1998;), finding some links between activity participation and increased self-efficacy. A research application of SCT to sustainable tourism found that empathy towards sustainability was dependent upon one's attachment to the object, and also determined by personal norms directing the inclination to help oneself or others in addition to individualistic and collectivistic social norms (Font, Garay, & Jones, 2016). Doran, Hanss, and Larsen (2015) investigated the related issue of tourists' willingness to pay extra for environmental protection while traveling. This study found that respondents' own attitudes, social comparison, self-efficacy beliefs, and collective efficacy beliefs were associated with an increased willingness to pay extra for environmental protection, while respondents' perception of others' attitudes were not found to be significantly associated with a willingness to pay. A different study (Lin & Hsu, 2015) investigating green consumer behavior using SCT showed that individuals may acknowledge and hold concerns about environmental issues, but need a combination of self-regulatory ability and certain beliefs to make changes in their own lifestyle and consumer habits that would positively effect change. If an organization can make pro-social and pro-environmental behavior seem more enjoyable as well as plausible, they may have an easier time gaining followers and retaining members.

Hedonic v. utilitarian consumer choice: Recent consumer psychology research has investigated this topic by questioning whether hedonic product choices have greater appeal than more utilitarian options. *Hedonic* is defined as pertaining to psychological, pleasure or entertaining-based personal experiences (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Vogt, 1993) that lead to gratification from sensory attributes (Batra & Ahtola, 1991). *Utilitarian* describes non-sensory and functional options that are selected for instrumental reasons (Batra & Ahtola, 1991). This is a highly relevant consideration for an organization that has the ability to offer both types of products

(mainly travel experiences, in this case) to their consumers (members and other potential participants/supporters), or a product that reflects a combination. By achieving an appropriate balance of hedonic product offerings, such as rafting expeditions, and conservation and education-based deliverables, the organization could potentially maximize their fundraising and engagement levels. Research has indicated that hedonic offerings are more preferred in promotional contexts (Palazon & Delgado-Ballester, 2013), and that hedonic messaging during a charity appeal increases donation rates (Savary, Goldsmith, & Dhar, 2015). Another study (Zemack-Rugar et al., 2016) found that “guilt-sensitive” consumers who usually avoid hedonic purchases are just as likely as their less guilt-sensitive consumers to indulge in a hedonic product if it is linked to a charitable donation. Greater pleasure may be derived for an individual when they do not have to choose between a hedonic option of self-interest (such as a reward) and a more pro-social option (such as a donation to charity) but instead receive an imposed offering of self-interest (Berman & Small, 2012).

Methods

A cooperative research agreement was established in late 2015 with a western United States national park association to better understand potential participant interest in future courses and experiences. A cross-sectional survey was used for quantitative data collection. The population for the survey was a census of the association membership. An electronic list of contacts was provided to researchers by the association. Duplicate names were removed and contacts combined where appropriate in an effort to have one unique household contact. Over nine thousand (N=9,182) contacts were uploaded into Qualtrics for survey distribution. Distribution of the survey began in early 2016. Two reminder emails were sent to those that had not responded to the survey. In total, 1,898 survey responses from members were submitted and analyzed.

Based on total responses analyzed, the overall response rate to survey distribution was 21%. Of the people who responded regarding their gender, 47% were male and 53% were female. For age distribution, 3% were 35 years old or younger, 22% were 36 to 55, and 75% were 56 years or older. About a quarter of respondents (26.5%) resided in the state where the national park and association were located, with the remainder living in other states. To measure behaviors, respondents were asked about the types of activities in which they regularly participate. All respondents were members of the “friends” association under study and 75% of the respondents either occasionally, frequently, or often donated to environmental nonprofits in general. Two additional behaviors were of particular relevance to the study: travel and volunteering, the latter of which is a behavior often tied to nonprofit associations. Yes/no questions asked whether the respondent traveled or volunteered. Eleven percent of the sample (n=207) indicated neither behavior. The remaining sample was coded into a new variable comprised of three groups: travel (n=854, 45%), volunteer (n=72, 4%), and both travel and volunteer (n=765, 40%).

To measure personal and environmental factors, a series of interest or belief items that directly related to being a member of a national park “friends” association were employed using 5-point Likert scales. Items that *a priori* aligned with the definition of personal or environment were used in the analysis to test the extent to which personal and environmental attributes relate to travel as a representation of hedonic consumption or volunteering as a representation of utilitarian or altruistic consumption, or both.

SPSS was utilized to analyze the survey data. Descriptive statistics were used to highlight evidence of personal and environmental attributes related to travel and conservation support behaviors. ANOVA tests were used to assess relationships between personal and environmental attributes and behaviors. Means were estimated in one-way ANOVA tests. Levene's tests of homogeneity of variances were estimated and checked. When this test was violated, a Welch F-test was estimated and reported. Significance levels of <.05 were applied to the F-tests.

Results

To test Social Cognitive Theory and the existence of hedonic and utilitarian personal and environmental attributes being associated with membership to a national park “friends” association, three sets of belief-related items were measured. The belief-related statements included the importance of membership (Table 1), the influence of course and trip features on enrolling in a program offered by the association (Table 2), and interest in course and travel experience themes (Table 3). Analyses highlight behaviors in travel and volunteering to further test hedonic consumption and utilitarian consumption.

Overall, differences between travel, volunteer, and travel/volunteer groups were not large or statistically significant in Table 1. Respondents generally valued factors with a mix of personal, external, hedonic and utilitarian attributes. All categories agreed that maintaining trails in the park was very important. The least important attribute was whether their support would be acknowledged publicly, an example of an external “award.”

Table 1. Importance of membership attributes for the “friends” association under study by travel or volunteer behaviors

Membership attributes	Travel	Volunteer	Travel and Volunteer	F-test or Welch (W)
Knowing exactly how your dollars will be spent ^{P,U}	3.3	3.5	3.3	1.5
Being informed of how your money was used and the impacts it made ^{P,U}	3.4	3.5	3.5	2.1
Having your preferences met in terms of how often, and by what methods, you are contacted by the organization ^{P,U}	3.0	3.2	3.1	4.1* (W)
Maintaining trails in the national park ^{P,H}	4.2	4.2	4.3	1.5
Helping fund educational programs in the national park or affiliated programs ^{E,U}	3.6	3.7	3.7	6.3** (W)
Helping kids experience nature in the national park ^{E,U}	3.6	3.8	3.7	3.0
Acknowledging your support publicly ^{E,H}	1.6	1.7	1.6	.8
Committing to sustainability initiatives by the association ^{E,U}	3.7	3.8	3.8	4.3* (W)

Likert scale 1 to 5 values where: 1 = not at all important; 2 = somewhat important; 3 = moderately important; 4 = very important; 5 = extremely important; significant at ***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05

^Ppersonal attribute; ^Eexternal attribute; ^Hhedonic ; ^Uutilitarian

In considering the importance of product features (Table 2), respondents in all behavior categories were most enthusiastic about the ability to access uncrowded and “off-the-beaten-path” locations. This shows strong support for a personal-focused, hedonic factor. Opportunities to learn about sustainability and climate change, which appeal to personal values but lack hedonic association, were not nearly as strong influences. People who volunteer were more interested overall in learning offerings compared to just travelers.

Table 2. Influence of product features to influence enrollment in “friends” offered course/travel programs by travel or volunteer behaviors

Product features	Travel	Volunteer	Travel and Volunteer	F-test or Welch (W)
Spontaneous, last minute booking options ^{P,H}	2.8	2.8	3.0	5.1** (W)
Half-day classes ^{P,H}	2.8	2.7	2.9	3.3* (W)
Classes less than \$100 per person ^{P,H}	3.1	3.1	3.4	10.6***
Access to uncrowded trails and areas that are off the beaten path ^{P,H}	3.8	4.1	4.0	7.3** (W)
Opportunities to learn about sustainability in America's national parks ^{P,U}	2.7	3.0	3.0	8.1*** (W)
Opportunities to learn about the effects of climate change on the national park ^{P,U}	2.7	2.9	2.8	4.1*

Likert scale 1 to 5 values where: 1 = not an influence; 2 = somewhat influence; 3 = moderate influence; 4 = very influential; 5 = extremely influential; significant at ***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05

^Ppersonal attribute; ^Eexternal attribute; ^Hhedonic ; ^Uutilitarian

Table 3 displays many significant differences between the three groups in their activity interests. The findings show that people who volunteer are most interested in volunteering. Volunteers are also most interested in participating in the more utilitarian offering of a wilderness skills course. Their scores were higher for the other more educational courses regarding history, although these may be considered hedonic offerings for history enthusiasts. Other popular offerings for all groups included whitewater rafting, an exciting and hedonic activity, and the day-long tour, a chance for people to explore more deeply into the park (relating to the hedonic desire for off-the-beaten-path exploration).

Table 3. Interest levels in courses or travel experiences that “friends” association might offer by travel or volunteer behaviors

Course or travel topics	Travel	Volunteer	Travel and Volunteer	F-test or Welch (W)
Natural history (ecology, geology, wildlife) ^{P,H/U}	3.8	4.1	4.1	13.4*** (W)
Cultural history (archaeology, Native American history, pioneer history) ^{P,H/U}	3.8	4.0	4.0	8.5*** (W)
Photography or art ^{P,H}	3.3	3.0	3.4	4.0*
Yoga or spiritual ^{P,H}	1.9	1.9	2.1	8.4***
Wilderness skills (orienteering, backcountry skills) ^{E,U}	2.9	3.3	3.1	7.4**
Half-day tour ^{P,H}	3.1	2.9	3.2	1.8
Day-long tour ^{P,H}	3.3	3.3	3.5	3.1*
Fully-outfitted backpacking trip ^{P,H}	2.6	2.7	2.9	8.8***
Volunteer opportunities in national park ^{P,U}	2.4	3.9	3.4	146.1*** (W)
Beginner backpacking ^{P,H}	2.0	2.0	2.3	7.7** (W)
Advanced backpacking ^{P,H}	2.2	2.8	2.5	10.6*** (W)
Women-only classes ^{P,H}	1.8	1.7	2.2	20.0*** (W)
Family-only classes ^{P,H}	1.7	1.6	1.8	2.0
Whitewater rafting ^{P,H}	3.1	3.4	3.4	11.6***

Likert scale scored 1 to 5: 1 = not at all interested; 2 = somewhat interested; 3 = moderately interested; 4 = very interested; 5 = extremely interested; significant at *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

^Ppersonal attribute; ^Eexternal attribute; ^Hhedonic ; ^Uutilitarian

Additional descriptive statistics from the data provided further insight regarding members’ interests and priorities. The vast majority of members (80.8%) agreed that the statement “I believe in their mission, whether or not I benefit directly from their work” best describes why they choose to give to nonprofit organizations. This response, representing a utilitarian and selfless attitude, was far more popular than the more personally-concerned response of “I directly benefit from their work and do not want it to go away” (6.8%) or the externally motivated answer “I am setting a good example for others” (0.4%). Another survey item that stood out for its broad support from members was regarding the importance of the organization’s commitment to education by featuring expert instructors and guides. The mean score from all member respondents was a high 3.9 out of 5 (“very important”).

Discussion and Conclusion

While the vast majority of members reported that they are drawn to supporting a nonprofit because they believe in its mission, this research shows a divide between why people tend to support an organization and how they wish to be personally involved, which is likely especially true in the travel context. Respondents were most interested in receiving unique opportunities that would take them away from the usual park crowds and allow them to access places that many other tourists would never visit. Knowing that the organization would be working to maintain trails within the park was very important to people overall in considering their membership, which has a clear connection to the hedonic and personal desire to explore the park and escape crowds. Other than people identified as volunteers, most people indicated that they would rather not do the trail maintenance themselves, as volunteering in the park was not a highly popular activity option. Opportunities to learn about climate change and sustainability

initiatives were not as appealing overall, although volunteers were more interested in these options than non-volunteers. This lower level of interest in the climate change program offering is also consistent with the findings of Lin and Hsu (2015), who comment that climate change can be a more difficult topic to approach as it is attributed to broad human activity, and thus is associated with a substantial ethical dilemma that many people wish to avoid. Overall, hedonic interests were found to be strong amongst this national park member-based association. Consistent with expectations, members identifying as volunteers, while also showing strong interest in the hedonic generally showed a higher interest in utilitarian or altruistic offerings than non-volunteers.

Construal level theory of psychological distance is potentially helpful in understanding members' preferences towards the hedonic. This theory asserts that the farther (in space, time, social distance, or hypotheticality) one is from an object in their own direct experience, the more abstract their level of construal of that object will be (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In applying this notion to product choice, research has indicated that consumers often prefer more hedonic options if they have a greater temporal distance from obtaining or experiencing it (Huang, Wu, & Lin, 2016). In the trip planning context, it would logically follow that "bucket list" types of trips to iconic, world-renowned destinations such as this national park would be associated with a higher level of hedonic choice-making, as travelers plan their trips often well in advance, perhaps having entertained the notion of visiting for many years. Thus, more guests might opt for the exciting and site-specific activity of whitewater rafting than a basic and more general wilderness skills course. In planning to visit an iconic location, visitors envision and seek activities that, too, seem iconic, on par with the grandeur of the location as well as their overall vacation plan.

The role of external influences was somewhat more difficult to assess within the results. Respondents did not find member recognition very important; however, past research has shown that people often underestimate the value they place on status in their donation behavior (Kataria & Regner, 2015) and not admit the extent of which they are concerned with their outward appearance (Johansson-Stenman & Martinsson, 2006). Respondents showed stronger support for external variables in which there were clear benefits to the public good (i.e. supporting education and children's access to the outdoors) rather than just to a self-serving interest.

In general, findings from this research reveal the great importance of personal factors in members' interest in a nonprofit and in their chosen travel activities. People seek unique and personally fulfilling activities from providers who they feel are well qualified. In an era of online trip planning and competitive travel options, many people pride themselves on making savvy decisions that exhibit mindfulness and an ability to do things differently than "typical" tourists. Exhibiting self-efficacy in outdoor travel is not just about whether one has a high degree of skills in, say, whitewater rafting or photography, but about whether they have the skills to find the best resources possible to experience a place to its maximum potential. To create the most appealing experiences, nonprofits and other activity providers can consider how their offerings can be more place-specific, emphasizing the unique and prominent features of their location while also identifying ways to share with visitors the less obvious aspects of the destination's appeal. In considering the role of their specific location along with consumer preferences and travel behaviors, a nonprofit organization can seek creative outlets to raise funds toward their mission in ways that are still relevant to the cause, but are lighthearted, enjoyable, and tailored to what people seek in their travel experiences.

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